

To Daniel Fish Esq
With the Compliments of Geo. R. Peck

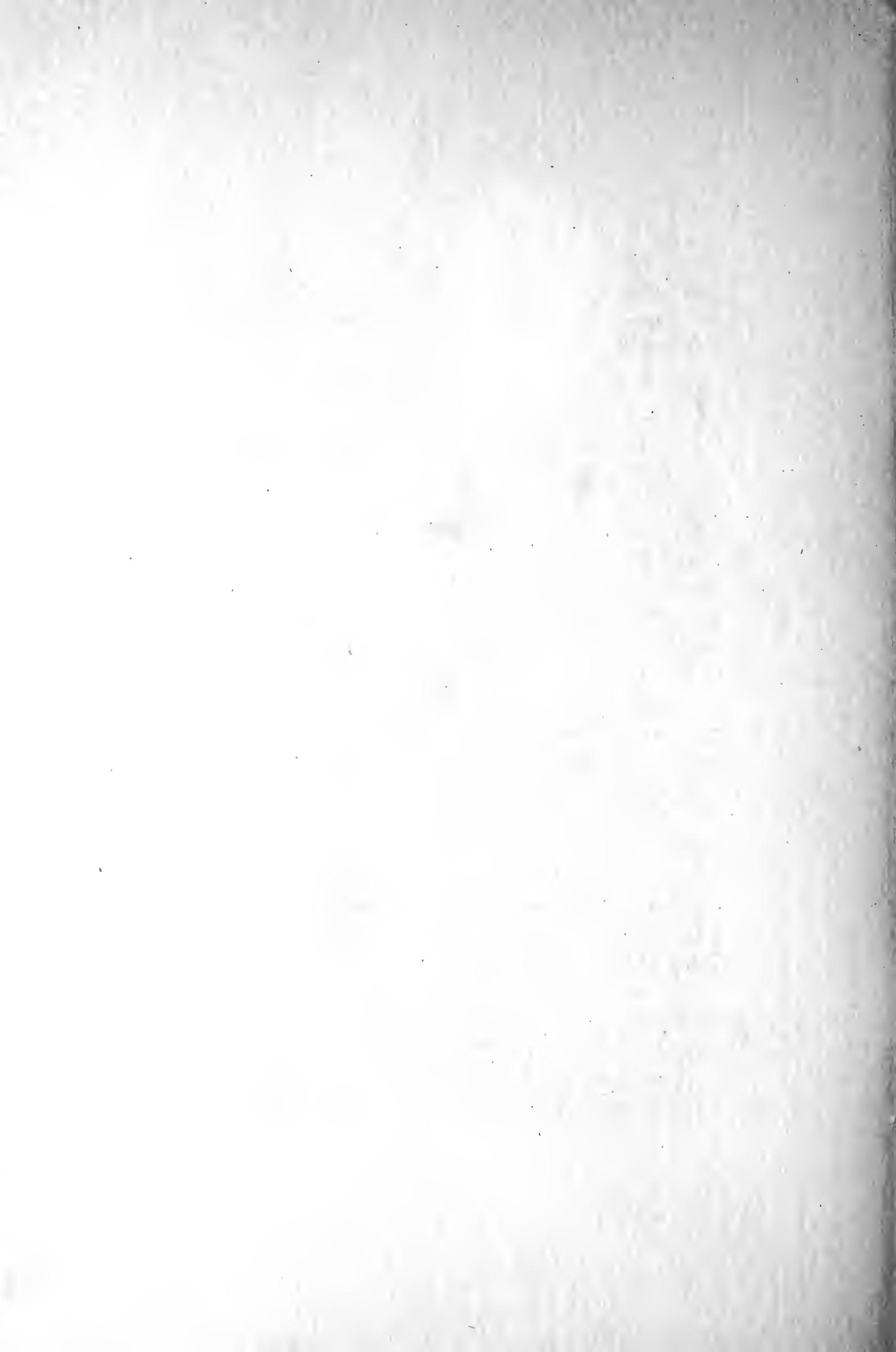
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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

AN ADDRESS AT JANESVILLE, WISCONSIN,
AT THE CELEBRATION
OF THE CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S BIRTH,
FEBRUARY 12, 1909.

BY

GEORGE R. PECK



Mr. President, Members of the Rock County Bar Association, Comrades of the Grand Army, Ladies and Gentlemen:

IT is very fitting and appropriate that this association of lawyers should render homage to one of their calling, who, after winning high professional distinction, took to himself a glory and a fame that cannot die. You do well to remember that Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer. If you will recall his last great years—the years by which the world knows him—you will feel a certain pride in belonging to that profession which he chose in youth and whose principles and traditions were his guide and monitors to the end. In all that majestic on-marching career we may see—nay, we cannot fail to see—that he followed with almost religious devotion the approving voice and sanction of the law. Mark the solemn language which was the real keynote of the first inaugural: “I hold,” he said, “that in contemplation of universal law and of the constitution, the union of these states is perpetual.” In that sentence it was the lawyer who spoke, giving to the statesmen who surrounded him the fundamental idea upon which it was his purpose to stand. It was a brave pronouncement. Certainly it was also political wisdom and political truth, but above these the clear vision of Abraham Lincoln saw the organic law of a nation consecrated and enthroned. I bid you, gentlemen of the bar, take mindful heed of that

great ideal which lifted Abraham Lincoln to such lofty heights.

This much I have thought to say of him, because he belonged to our guild. He knew, as we do, the rigor of a lawsuit; he had felt the joy of victory and the smart of defeat; and, I do not doubt, the memory of the days when he traveled the circuit and of forensic contests in which he had taken part nerved and strengthened him in the weary years when nerve and strength were sorely needed. But Abraham Lincoln was not a mere lawyer, and history has given him a fame so universal that the world hardly remembers he belonged to our profession. But, if we cannot claim him simply because we are lawyers, we may yet rejoice that, as citizens of the Republic, we participate with all that bear the American name in his unfading renown.

In very truth he belongs alike to all who have shared the precious heritage which he left to his countrymen. He belongs to them as the lighthouse does to the mariner who steers his bark by its steadfast ray. He belongs to all who cherish the ideas, the hope and the faith that were in him. Whatever sad and heroic memories cluster around his great career, something of their glory, some breath of their fragrance, rests upon every man who strives to make the United States of America such a nation as Abraham Lincoln strove to make it.

When we think of the name that is in every heart and upon every lip, how like a dream seems the century that is past! In a rude Kentucky cabin

a hundred years ago this very day the curtain was rising upon a drama which was destined to be of epic grandeur. Recalling the hour and the event, we almost seem to hear the rhythmic beat of the years as they speed to their eternal goal.

It is sometimes said, and said with truth, that the American character, considered as a type, has not yet been formed and moulded into shape. Undoubtedly it is still plastic and mutable; but we must remember that the processes of time are slow. The entire period since the western continent dawned upon Europe is but a brief span in comparison with the centuries which have been fusing Norman and Saxon and Dane into the English race; and yet we have something to show when great names are counted, something to remember when great deeds are told. Abraham Lincoln outshines the Plantagenets, and ennobles common blood forevermore.

The laws of descent are mysterious, if not altogether fathomless. Science, indeed, tells us that men are, in their essential qualities, the result and product of all their ancestors. But how and why it is-- who can tell? The lineage of Abraham Lincoln was so humble, his environment and that of his family so narrow and so steeped in poverty, it seems like a miracle that he should ever have burst such bonds. Nicolay and Hay, in their great work, after describing his wretched birthplace, say: "And there, in the midst of the most unpromising circumstances that ever witnessed the advent of a hero into the world, Abraham Lincoln was born on the 12th day

of February, 1809.' In this event there was nothing to attract attention--absolutely no prophecy of the future latently slumbering in the new born child. Least of all was there any hint of the solemn pageantry with which a great nation this day commemorates that lowly birth. Birthdays are rests and pauses in the symphony of time, and in observing the great and notable ones we set history to music.

Abraham Lincoln's parents were Virginians, but the ancestral strain flowed from Old England through New England, New Jersey and Pennsylvania before it reached Virginia. The first of his race to settle in America was Samuel Lincoln, who came from Norwich, England, in 1638, and cast his lot with the God-fearing settlers who had located in the forest solitudes of Hingham, Massachusetts. Later, his son, Mordecai, pushed on to New Jersey, and thence to Pennsylvania. John, who was Mordecai's son, returned from Pennsylvania to New Jersey, but soon sought another home in Rockingham County, Virginia, and through him the blood of the Hingham Puritan flowed uninterruptedly to Abraham Lincoln. They were a family of frequent migrations, ever hungering for the wilderness and the frontier. If you follow their footsteps you will be led from Massachusetts to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Kentucky, and, after the birth of Abraham Lincoln, to Indiana and Illinois. Out of these wanderings, perhaps by reason of them, or, it may be, in spite of them, was evolved the highest type of man this nation has known. And that is the mystery of it

all, from every point of view. Human wisdom fails utterly when it grapples such a question. If any answer shall ever come, it must be in that far off ultimate region where the mind can get nearer than now to the fugitive wherefore, and the ever elusive why. What gave so humble a plant such a noble fruitage is a problem we cannot yet solve. But this we know, that it is our boon and privilege to behold, admire and love. Carlyle, within certain limitations, was not far from right in adoring heroes, and he was more than right in seeing that heroes do not of necessity wear plumes and sabers. It is the meek and not the mighty who are promised the inheritance of the earth. Francis of Assisi, out on the mountain side, calling the birds to come and perch upon his shoulders, and beckoning the poor peasantry to follow him in the pathway to the higher life, is a nobler figure than the great Medici, bent with the weight of his tinsel and his broidery. In the same way it may be truly said that Luther was a greater conqueror than Von Moltke, and Victor Hugo in exile a more potent force than the Third Napoleon in the Tuilleries. Ideal characters cannot be made to order. They must stand for something more than accident, for something better than titles and dignities. You do well to celebrate this day, and you will be wise if, here and now, you pledge a new and increasing fealty to the memory of Abraham Lincoln and his noble life. The times in which we live are filled with high appeals and solemn warnings, and yet we are in danger of forgetting plain old truths.

The age is restless. Everywhere there is discontent, partly right and partly wrong; but they greatly err who imagine that the white crest upon the wave is a true measure of the depths below. The dogmatist and the doctrinaire, whose lips have hardly been moistened by the dew of wisdom, think that they, above all others, have a message to which the age must listen. And thus it happens that things are often made to seem more, and sometimes far less, than they really are. It is well, perhaps, that it should be so. Let us not complain, for it is a wise and wholesome liberty which declares that every creed and doctrine shall be heard and every voice shall have its say. But when the crickets pipe and chirrup, it is pleasant to think that somewhere there is peace; and when summer heats are upon us, it is sweet to rest in the shadow of an illustrious name. "He was not of an age, but for all time," was the noble tribute of Ben Jonson to Shakespeare, and it is as widely true of him who was the gentlest, bravest, wisest leader that ever wore the name of American citizen.

Abraham Lincoln was great, not fully knowing, but, I think, always believing in his own greatness. In him common sense took on flesh and blood. Rooted in humble soil, his life grew and strengthened and unconsciously flowered into fame. If you compare him with other statesmen—with Pitt, or Fox, or Palmerston—you will see that he had learned the secret never revealed to them, the sublime art of leading while seeming to follow. He is sometimes

called the founder of the Republican party. He was not that, but he was more. When, in 1858, he made that memorable canvass of Illinois, his party was a great instrument, discordant and untuned. He touched its chords and straightway a nation leaped into life to follow its enchanting strains. Some, perhaps, are here today who knew him; all have felt in their veins the thrill of his inspiring words. In those early days no one fathomed him. To his neighbors he was a plain, homely man, but behind that rugged face and the ill-fitting clothes there dwelt the soul of a ruler. No herald announced his coming, no trumpet sounded when a new Agamemnon—not king of men, but leader of men—rose from the prairies. “Is not a man better than a town,” asks Emerson. Verily, Abraham Lincoln, proclaiming the unwelcome truth that had just begun to dawn, was more than a city with all its domes and turrets flashing against the sky. We often talk of men who have a mission. Think of him in all that great debate, sounding into unwilling ears the prophetic figure of the house divided against itself. Again and again it rang out, like an alarm bell, calling upon men to bestir themselves if they would avert the gathering wrath.

And the storm came—but the house stood. It stood because Abraham Lincoln lived to set it right and to make all who dwelt therein free, by the grace of God and his own immortal pen.

It is something more than a sentiment which makes us love the memory of Abraham Lincoln,

though sentiment alone is a sufficient reason. The years have lifted him into the region of legend and tradition. But there are still among us men whose memories go back to the days when he carried the nation's burdens. They remember how the world opened its eyes to marvel at his never-failing judgment, his tender sympathy, and the unconquerable spirit which disaster could not shake nor victory too much elate. He kept his even poise in good and in evil times. No president before or since ever selected such a cabinet. He chose his rivals to be his advisers and easily towered above them all. And yet this man, so sagacious and sensible, had, as the greatest always have, a temperament highly wrought, poetical, mystical, almost superstitious. The unseen world haunted him like a vision. To him was given that inward eye of which Wordsworth sang, the deep perception of things which are precious because they are invisible. It seems strange to us that Abraham Lincoln believed in the dreams that came to him before great victories and defeats; but it is because we cannot fully comprehend a nature in which, if there had not been some vent, soul and body would have sunk together under the terrible strain that was upon him. In the midst of it all a merciful solace came to him in that sense of humor with which he was so largely endowed. Only fools are always serious. Abraham Lincoln's humor gives him a place in the first order of minds. Laughter and tears are next of kin. The same pen that wrote Hamlet gave to the world the rollicking fun of Fal-

staff, and thereby showed that his genius was "as broad and general as the casing air." If Abraham Lincoln had been a pedant; if he had been simply an able lawyer; nay, if he had been only a statesman, instead of a Man, you would never have heard of his stealing silently out of the White House at night, out under the midnight sky, alone, to think of the old days by the Sangamon and to brood over the unknown future and the veil which hung between him and his destiny.

The mythical and the romantic have already gathered their stories and wreathed them about his name. The age of chivalry has passed, and this unromantic century does not readily accept the traditional and the unreal; and yet King Arthur and the Cid are no more heroes in the fabulous tales of their knightly deeds than is Abraham Lincoln in the quaint and curious anecdotes of his life. He is the only great man in history whom we can make seem like ourselves, the plain, everyday people. Who knew as he did how to say the right word? Who, like him, could touch the popular heart when it was ready to break, and make it beat again with his own high resolves? We took our courage from him, and the shattered armies filled up when he sounded the summons to come.

The great crisis of his life, as all the world knows, was the proclamation of freedom. It has been glorified in history, poetry and art. And yet, resplendent as it was, he gave to it none of the dramatic coloring which usually accompanies such events. It

was, perhaps, an inspiration, but it was not such as suddenly came to Napoleon, when he called upon the Pyramids and past ages to be witnesses of his genius. If you will stop to consider, you will see how the very greatness of it forbade any of the tawdry gilding of a theatrical performance. Others might be thinking of such things, but he had "that within which passeth show." Simplicity is the truest sublimity. And thus it happened that the greatest act in American history—perhaps in all history—went forth only as an appeal to "the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God."

And then his prophecy came true. The house ceased to be divided. The armies of the Union, pressing forward with new hope, carried victory and freedom together and made them one. History has given Abraham Lincoln a unique place. He had power greater than any king or emperor, and he used it as modestly as a village pastor might wield his influence over a rural congregation. It has sometimes been said that he did not have in the highest sense what is known as executive ability. I am glad that he did not. Very small men have had that. But he had what is better. He was granite for the right, but yielding as water when common sorrows touched his own sad heart.

"The better angels of our nature," of which he spoke in that first sublime appeal to his countrymen, were living realities to him; and many a time, when some soldier boy had made a slip from the rules of military duty and discipline, those better angels

pleaded for him, and pleaded not in vain. How true it is that "spirits are not finely touched but to fine issues." Abraham Lincoln's nature was not that which is commonly, but mistakenly, supposed to dwell in the backwoodsman and the rustic. God sets his seal on the brow which is worthy to receive it. You cannot tell what subtle law it was that made a Warwickshire village flash Shakespeare upon the world's great canvas, nor why Burns came from an Ayrshire cottage to be the universal singer of humanity. Equally, it is beyond our ken to guess why Abraham Lincoln, plain and homespun, was called from an Illinois prairie to the first place in the world.

He was above all things a man; strong, resolute, modest, too great to be proud, too deeply introspective not to see his own limitations and his own possibilities. No ruler by divine right ever had more true dignity; no laborer driving his team afield more true humility. As Abraham Lincoln, he never forgot that he was president; as president, he never forgot that he was Abraham Lincoln. He was more than conqueror. The armies triumphed at last; but greater than Atlanta or Richmond or Appomattox was the conquest he made of the world's opinions and the world's heart. Four years had lifted him into the secure region where neither malice nor envy nor uncharitableness can ever come again. And what years they were! Years of broken hopes, of pride crushed under chariot wheels, years of disappointment and years of agony. Armies had gone

down in ruin, and generals had ridden to defeat; but still the nation waited, patiently trusting the leader who never spoke a doubting word. We lived on hope, "the medicine of the unhappy." But the currents came right at last. Victories began to crowd upon each other, giving assurance that fortune had repented and would make atonement for the past.

Those of us who are old remember how the Fourth of July gained a new lustre at Gettysburg, and was given a deeper meaning when Vicksburg opened its gates and the river flowed unvexed to the sea. And then the months went on, crowded with thrilling scenes, as if a new Homer were chanting another story for the ages. Every day some shackle was broken; every hour some slave stood up and thanked God that he was free. In that last triumphal year there was a Wilderness to be crossed, but there was a Grant to cross it. There was a sea kissing the beach by Savannah, but there was a Sherman eager to plant the flag on its shore. And so the end came in glory and with a joy that never could find words. And with the end came death—and immortality.

"When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,
And the great star early drooped in the western sky in the night,
I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever returning spring."

Nature has griefs that claim kinship with humanity. The story is told that farmers in central Illinois insisted, with quaint but touching gravity, that the brown thrush did not sing for a year after he died. When he ceased to breathe, Edwin M. Stanton turned to the group of mourners standing

by his bedside and said, "Now he belongs to the ages."

It is true; and the times in which we live, the events which we have witnessed, or that have come to us from those who saw and heard and felt, make us hostages to his memory, and pledge us to that universal truth whose voice pleads for every good cause.

It is an inspiring thing to follow one whose leadership is always toward what is best in American citizenship. Viewing that greatest figure in all our history, we cannot fail to see that he was absolutely free from cant and affectation, doing bravely and openly the things he conceived to be his duty. He lived in plain view of his neighbors and friends, sharing their joys and sorrows, doing his duty after the fashion of a brave and honest man. Until the time when the nation called him to his great office, he might have been counted, and, I suppose, was counted, in some sense, a politician, but I have never heard that he was ashamed of the fact, or had cause to be ashamed. Undoubtedly he recognized, and it is one proof of his greatness, that in every constitutional government parties, notwithstanding their blemishes and imperfections, are the forces upon which statesmen and patriots and the people themselves must rely. If you would make steam work, you must harness it into the mechanism of an engine. If you would make principles effective, you must organize them into moral batteries which will break down the forces that stand in their path.

The large, well-rounded nature of Abraham Lin-

coln always reached out for the high essentials, but never wasted time on small abstractions. Slavery in all its forms was hideous to him, and he opposed its extension with all the strength of his rugged nature, but, recognizing its constitutional sanctions, he never thought of disturbing it in the states where it was protected by law until, to save the Union and to crush the rebellion, he sentenced it to death.

Abraham Lincoln was the apostle of opportunity. Doing always the duty that lay nearest, he worked with the tools that were at hand. He knew—and we must learn—that majorities and minorities may be right or wrong; but whatever is best will some day come if only patience stands on guard.

How paltry seem the little contentions of little men! More than any other of our statesmen, Abraham Lincoln stands for that largeness of view, that serene balance of mind, which is the true evidence of genius. And that is our highest lesson today and the lesson for the centuries to come. Above all else, Abraham Lincoln leads us away from things which are petty and ignoble to the heights—always to the heights.

Comrades of the Grand Army:—More than any others in this great assemblage, you are the sure and concrete proof of American patriotism. You have worn the blue, you have carried the flag, and you have stood in rank when the air was filled with scream of shot and shell. But today the peace for

which you fought rests upon you as a blessing and a benediction.

Let me salute you in soldier fashion and give you heart and hand in memory of the old days and the old cause. It must needs be that time and frost and the years that never stop have stiffened our joints and given us the stoop of age, but shall the currents of our hearts be slackened? Comrades, we are old; but there are infinite memories which invoke us to be true to the cause which was the love of our youth. When fife and drum were sounding it was easy to keep step to every call, and now, when our lives have almost reached the end, and our walk is slow and heavy, let us proudly remember that it was Abraham Lincoln who summoned us to defend a government of the people, by the people, for the people.



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